

The History of Israel: A Primer

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Israel is only 70 years old, but it has had an eventful history, and it is the continuation of the 3,000-year history of the Jews. The easiest way to frame the modern history of Zionism and Israel is to see it as unfolding in six phases: Longing, Planning, Building, Defending, Peacemaking, and Prospering.

1. Longing. In the formative period of their ancient history, the people of Israel exercised territorial sovereignty, built a great Temple in Jerusalem, and conducted warfare and statecraft as one of the major peoples of Near Eastern antiquity. Like other ancient peoples, from Egypt to Mesopotamia, they experienced periods of grandeur and decadence, until, in the first century AD, the Roman Empire defeated and dispersed them.

Under similar circumstances, the other ancient peoples of the Near East vanished. They exchanged their religions and languages for those of their conquerors, and lost all memory of their peoplehood.

The Jews did not, and this is what distinguishes them. Despite their loss of sovereignty and dispersion, they preserved their religion and language. Just as importantly, they preserved memory of the Land of Israel as the place of their past greatness, given to them in covenant by God. Christians are named after their savior (Jesus); Muslims are named after a principle of their belief (Islam, meaning submission). But Jews are named after a place, Judaea, to which they ever remained attached, and for which they prayed and longed for 2,000 years.

The persistence of this attachment is one of the mysteries (some would say, the miracles) of history. The Bible was itself a powerful reminder of the link between land and faith. It is a book not only of revelation but of history and geography. In it, God's covenant is tethered to His gift of the land to His faithful. There are many explanations for the Jews' survival as a people with an indelible memory of their ancestral land. But their possession of the Bible is the most persuasive one.

The Jews, following their dispersion, spread across the globe, and important clusters settled across Europe and the Islamic world. But from the late Middle Ages onward, the largest masses of them resided in the "Pale of Settlement," a zone within the Russian Empire (which also included today's Poland). These Jews spoke Yiddish, an amalgam of medieval German and Hebrew, and adhered fervently to tradition. Although often persecuted, they were more often tolerated. In many places, their culture flourished, and their numbers grew.

But in the 19th century, nationalism spread across Europe. The Jews, who had preserved their own sense of peoplehood, came to be demonized as "foreigners," because they had their own languages, professed a religion other than Christianity, and followed their own system of law. In the late 19th century, their opponents increasingly defined them as a race apart, an import from the East parasitically embedded in the West, which had to be excised from Europe. This ideology was called anti-Semitism. Its spread made the Jews vulnerable to discrimination in the west of Europe, and to violent depredations in its east, including murderous riots known as pogroms.

2. Planning. By the late 19th century, some Jews concluded that Europe could offer no solution to the "Jewish question," and that Jews would have to find refuge elsewhere. Some two million left the "Pale of Settlement" for America. But over five million remained in the Russian Empire, where their situation continued to deteriorate. Some Jews now thought to translate the latent longing for the Land of Israel into a practical program of return to the

ancestral homeland. They called themselves Zionists, after Zion, a synonym for Jerusalem.

After the dispersal of the Jews, the land changed hands numerous times. Its conquerors included Byzantines, Persians, Arabs, Crusaders, and Turks. In the early 16th century, the land came under the rule of the Ottomans, in whose vast empire it formed only one province.

At times the Ottomans fostered the land's prosperity (they built the magnificent 16th-century walls that still enclose the Old City of Jerusalem). But as the Ottomans declined, they neglected this province, so that by the 19th century, Jerusalem and its environs had become a sparsely populated backwater. The first Zionist settlers, who arrived beginning in the 1880s, did not find an empty land: it had an Arab population. But the Arabs numbered only some hundreds of thousands, and much of the land remained barren.

As the 19th-century closed, a charismatic Jewish journalist from Vienna, Theodor Herzl, also concluded that the Jews would never find acceptance in a Europe increasingly infected by anti-Semitic racism. But he believed that Zionism needed to promise the Jews more than a refuge. The only solution to the "Jewish question" lay in a Jewish state. His influential book *The Jewish State* fired the imagination of Zionists. But he went beyond the idea: Herzl thought the Zionists needed a political organization, to coordinate Zionist settlement activities and make the Zionist case in world capitals.

In 1897, Herzl convened the first Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland. The congress, which established the Zionist Organization, publicly resolved "to secure for the Jewish people a publicly recognized, legally assured homeland in Palestine." The congress also established financial institutions to accelerate Jewish settlement. These developments galvanized Zionists everywhere. Herzl confided in his diary: "At Basel, I founded the Jewish State. If I said this out loud today, I would be answered by universal laughter. Perhaps in five years, certainly in fifty, everyone will know it."

In 1914, the Ottoman Empire precipitated its own demise: it joined the war on the side of the Germany and Austro-Hungary, against Britain, France, and Russia. The Zionists in Britain, foremost among them the Russian-born chemist Chaim Weizmann, anticipated that the British, who then ruled Egypt, would add Palestine to their imperial holdings. Weizmann persuaded leading British statesmen, most notably the prime minister Lloyd George and foreign secretary Arthur James Balfour, that British patronage of Zionism would help mobilize Jewish opinion in America to support Britain in the war, and strengthen Britain's own claim to Palestine.

In November 1917, the British war cabinet issued the Balfour Declaration, a promise to support the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine, with the provision that nothing be done to prejudice the civil and religious rights of the existing non-Jewish communities. The Balfour Declaration (whose centennial was just marked by Prime Ministers Netanyahu and May in London) constituted the first breakthrough in winning the support of a great power for the Zionist program. That same great power, Britain, in December 1917, occupied Jerusalem, and by 1918 the British had driven out the Ottomans entirely, establishing British military rule.

In 1922, the new League of Nations entrusted Britain with the task of bringing Palestine gradually to independence (this was called a "mandate"), and from then until 1948, Britain ruled Palestine as a quasi-colony. The mandate included the Balfour Declaration in its preamble, so that a "national home" for the Jews finally had the sanction of international law.

3. Building. During the three decades of British rule, Zionists laid the foundations of a future state. The Jews could claim to immigrate to Palestine and purchase land there as a matter of right--it was recognized as their "national home"--and their numbers and land holdings gradually grew.

In 1917, Jews in the land numbered only 60,000, and constituted less than 10 percent of the population. By 1947, thirty years later, they numbered over

600,000, and formed a third of the population. Tel Aviv went from a small town to a large Jewish city. The Zionists revived Hebrew, which had survived as a liturgical language, and adapted it for daily use. Jewish communal settlements, known as kibbutzim or “collectives,” reclaimed barren lands. Zionists insisted that Jews do all manner of work, in agriculture and industry, and they formed labor organizations. One labor organizer, David Ben-Gurion, rose quickly to political preeminence. Zionists also formed political parties and established representative institutions.

The nascent state was built in the teeth of Arab opposition. Arabs launched attacks against the Jews in 1920 and 1929. After Hitler’s rise to power in 1933, the number of Jewish arrivals spiked, and the Arabs launched a full-scale rebellion against British rule in 1936. They saw the Zionist Jews as foreign intruders, whose growing numbers and strength might undermine their own prospects for independence.

In 1937, a British royal commission proposed a partition of the land, into a small Jewish state and a larger Arab one. The Zionists accepted the plan, imagining that even a small state could save many endangered Jews. But the Arabs rejected it, and the British scuttled it. In 1939, as war loomed in Europe, Britain opted to appease Arab opinion. They brought Jewish immigration and land purchases to a halt, and announced that Palestine would eventually become an Arab state with a Jewish minority. At the moment of their greatest need, Jews targeted by Nazi extermination found the doors to their “national home” tightly shut.

The Zionists naturally mobilized on the side of the Allies in the war, and many served in British ranks. But as soon as the war ended, they launched a political campaign against the British scheme for an Arab Palestine. Extreme Jewish factions also did not shy away from directly attacking British personnel. In 1947, the British announced their intention to withdraw from Palestine, and turned the future disposition of the country over to the new United Nations.

A UN commission recommended partition of the country into Jewish and Arab states of comparable sizes, and on November 29, 1947, the UN General Assembly voted in favor of the partition. Both the United States and the Soviet Union, for different reasons, supported it. The Zionists accepted the plan in principle, although it would have put Jerusalem outside the Jewish state, under international control. The Arabs, both in Palestine and beyond, rejected the partition plan *in toto*, and prepared for war. That war began sporadically as 1947 turned into 1948, between Jews and Arabs in Palestine, and in earnest after the British withdrawal, when armies from the neighboring Arab states invaded the country.

Many observers, including the Pentagon and CIA, thought that Jewish militia would be no match for the combined force of Arab conventional armies. Even some Israelis had doubts. But this did not deter Ben-Gurion, who on May 14, 1948, declared Israel an independent state. In fact, not only did the new Israeli army defend the territory allotted to it by the UN; it also expanded into territory allotted to the Arab state, from which hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Arabs fled as refugees. The war constituted an Israeli victory, and ended in armistice agreements between Israel and the Arab states. But these states declined to negotiate final peace agreements, hoping that in another round, they would defeat and destroy Israel.

The American relationship to Israel at this time vacillated. The US voted “yes” for partition in 1947, but in 1948 withdrew its support, instead proposing a UN trusteeship for Palestine. President Truman, much to the surprise and consternation of his own State Department, recognized Israel within minutes of its declaration of independence. But it also enforced a UN arms embargo on the Middle East. Israel would not receive any US military assistance until the presidency of John Kennedy, several decades later.

4. Defending. Upon independence, Israel had two priorities: to defend its newly won sovereignty, and to open its doors to the free immigration of Jewish refugees.

Between 1948 and 1973, Israel fought four conventional wars against neighboring Arab states, one each decade. While each war took a different form, all of them arose from a fundamental Arab refusal to accept Israel's existence as a fact. This translated into an Arab refusal to conclude peace, which left Israel a garrison state, isolated in its own region and always prepared for war.

In 1967, Israel responded to escalating Arab threats of annihilation by waging a preemptive war against Egypt and Syria and a defensive war against Jordan. In six days of fighting, Israel occupied all of Egypt's Sinai peninsula, Syria's Golan Heights, Jordan's West Bank, and the Gaza strip. The stunning victory put all of Jerusalem in Israel's hands, and raised Israel's stature in world eyes. The United States, in particular, began to see Israel as a valuable ally in the Cold War, and the US-Israeli relationship, which until then had been cool, began to warm.

But the 1967 Six-Day War also put millions of Palestinian Arabs under direct Israeli military rule. Israel was then, and still remains, profoundly divided over the way to translate that victory into peace and security. This debate would be sharpened in the 1970s, when a mostly autonomous Palestinian organization, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) under Yasser Arafat, began launching terrorist attacks against Israeli targets. The most infamous of these attacks ended in the deaths of a group of Israeli athletes participating in the Munich Olympic Games in 1972. The most famous counter-terrorism success was Israel's dramatic rescue of a group of its citizens whose airliner was hijacked by Palestinian terrorists to Entebbe, Uganda in 1976.

Despite the costs imposed by wars and terrorism, Israel during its first thirty years of independence grew stronger. The great masses of European Jews who might have populated a Jewish state had been destroyed by Hitler. But Israel nevertheless showed robust demographic growth, both from the absorption of the surviving remnants of European Jewry and also, just as importantly, from the mass immigration of Jews from Islamic countries in North Africa (especially Morocco) and the Middle East (particularly Iraq). And despite an Arab economic boycott, Israel developed a modern industrial economy which moved from import substitution to exports. It also built a firm technological base, exemplified by its emergence as a nuclear power.

5. Peacemaking. In 1973, on Yom Kippur day, the armies of Egypt and Syria launched a surprise attack against Israel. For a few days, it seemed as if the existence of Israel was seriously imperiled. But in a display of remarkable grit (and with the help of American arms resupplies) Israel turned the tide of the war, and emerged with a military victory--albeit a very costly won. In the war's aftermath, both Egypt and Israel recognized that their conflict imposed unbearable burdens on their peoples. In the subsequent six years, Henry Kissinger and Jimmy Carter intervened diplomatically to bring Egypt and Israel to agreements culminating in a peace treaty, thus breaking the encirclement of Israel and ending the cycle of a major war each decade.

The Arab-Israeli conflict ended on the White House lawn in 1979, with the signing of the Camp David peace accord by Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin. Since then, there has been no full-scale war between Israel and an Arab state. Even though not all Arab states followed Egypt's example, Egypt's exit from the conflict made it impossible for any other Arab state to face off against Israel alone.

However, the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians only intensified. In 1982, Israel launched a war against the PLO in Lebanon, and succeeded in driving Yasser Arafat out of the country. In 1987, a spontaneous Palestinian uprising in the West Bank and Gaza, known as the *intifada*, jolted Israel and

prompted a rethinking of Israeli policy among some of its leaders, most notably Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin.

In 1993, secret contacts between Israel and the PLO led to the Oslo Accords, signed on the White House lawn by Peres, Rabin, and Arafat, in the presence of President Bill Clinton. Although the agreement deferred resolution of many core issues to the future, it brought Arafat in from the cold, and allowed him to establish himself firmly in the West Bank and Gaza. Many believed that a general peace was imminent. In 1994, Jordan and Israel concluded a peace treaty. The final stage was envisioned to be an Israeli-Palestinian agreement for the end of conflict and creation of a Palestinian Arab state in most of the West Bank and Gaza.

But the attempt to reach an agreement at Camp David in 2000 ended in failure. Historians differ in how they apportion blame, but in retrospect it seems clear that Arafat and the PLO never fully reconciled themselves to accepting the permanence of Israel. They continued to believe that Israel's achievements could be reversed, and that history would turn in their favor. Why make historic concessions on issues like refugee return and Jerusalem, if in future the Jewish state was destined to wither? In the wake of the diplomatic failure, Palestinian terror groups, both those affiliated with Arafat and those arrayed against him, launched a campaign of suicide bombings against Israeli civilians. An Israeli counter-offensive, ordered by Ariel Sharon, reoccupied much of the West Bank and Gaza, and turned Arafat into a virtual prisoner until failing health claimed him in 2004.

Rejection of Israel received important reinforcement from the growth in the Middle East of Islamism, the highly politicized reading of Islam. Ayatollah Khomeini, who led the Iranian revolution of 1978-79, predicted that the day of Israel's destruction was nigh. Other Islamists, from the Muslim Brotherhood to the Lebanese Shiite Hezbollah and the Palestinian Hamas, have called for a continuing war of attrition against Israel, promising that it will culminate in Israel's demise. Israel's unilateral withdrawals from

Lebanon in 2000 and the Gaza strip in 2005 are also sometimes attributed to the effectiveness of Islamist “resistance.” Thus, the rise of Islamism, and the encouragement it extends to extremism generally, has put a brake on the legitimation of Israel in the Middle East, as have the periodic flare-ups between Israel and Hamas and Hezbollah. The expectation that Iran will become a full-fledged rival to Israel once it acquires nuclear capability also keeps the flame of rejection burning.

6. Prospering. Although much international attention focuses on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the looming threat posed by Iran, Israel is not defined by conflicts or threats, but by the spirit of solidarity and innovation shared by its people.

Israel has succeeded in isolating itself from the wider Middle East now torn apart by the after-effects of the so-called “Arab Spring.” It has used the respite provided by Arab self-absorption to build itself into a first-class technological power, a magnet for foreign investment, and a free-market economy geared toward growth. Israel has a diverse population, made up of people from Europe and Asia, of Jews and Arabs. But it is an advanced Western country by every parameter, situated somewhere in the middle of the OECD, and near the top in hi-tech innovation.

Israel has achieved this without a final resolution of its conflict with the Palestinians, or integration with the wider Middle East, which is sometimes dangled as a reward for Israeli concessions. Israel has learned to thrive in a sea of adversity, in the absence of a final peace, and its stability has made it a pillar of order in a region otherwise in disarray. No one knows what the future holds. But there is little question that on its 70th anniversary, Israel is more secure, more prosperous, and more tranquil than at almost any time in its history. As an ally, it provides more value than at any time in the past, and it is likely to continue to do so, even if peace proves elusive.